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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a quasi-experimental study which was designed and conducted to learn more about the impact of selected consultant interactional behaviors on consultee satisfaction with consultation. Specifically, the study focused on the effects of consultant effort to foster a collaborative consultative relationship. Consultant efforts were dichotomized into two approaches: a collaborative one, and a non-collaborative one which was labeled authoritative. Both approaches were based on a client-centered consultation format. The experimenter functioned as consultant for both approaches, implementing each in two different elementary schools. Seven teachers were exposed to the collaborative approach; five to the authoritative. The results indicated that teachers who consulted with the collaborative consultant were significantly more satisfied with the consultation than those who consulted with the authoritative consultant. (Author)

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Effects of Consultant Interactional Behaviors on Consultee Satisfaction with Consultation¹

Ralph D. Wenger

The term consultation has become so popular that it seems as if just about everyone uses it to characterize their professional activities. Several years ago, Barry (1970) suggested, only half facetiously, that the time had arrived when there were more consultants than consultees. Despite this great interest in this approach to service delivery, we still know very little about its process.

One way of gaining a greater understanding of the dynamics of this process would be to break the consultative relationship into its basic components: 1) consultant, 2) consultee, 3) environment, and 4) stimulus conditions. Once this had been accomplished, we could study the singular and interactional effects of these components on consultation outcomes.

I investigated the feasibility and heuristic value of this approach by examining one aspect of the consultant component, namely, consultant interactional behaviors. Specifically, I focused on consultee responses to two different types of consultant interactional behaviors. One type designated collaborative; the other authoritative. I hypothesized that the collaborative type would lead to more favorable consultation

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outcomes. This hypothesis was based on the speculation of professionals in the fields of mental health and school psychology consultation (Argyris, 1964; Bardon, 1963; Berlin, 1956, 1962, 1964; Fine & Tyler, 1971) and extrapolation from research into similar processes, such as decision making (Coch & French, 1948; Lawrence & Smith, 1955; Singer & Goldman, 1954).

Method

The authoritative and the collaborative consultant approaches were based on a client-centered consultation model (Caplan, 1970), and differed only in the area of consultant interactional behaviors. In the collaborative approach, the consultant sought to involve the consultee in the process of determining the child's educational needs and the means for helping the child meet them. The consultant encouraged the consultee by word and action to join him in developing strategies and techniques the consultee could use in the classroom to help the child. In the authoritative approach, the consultant invited consultee participation only to the extent of providing input, perceptions, and hypotheses about the client. The consultant developed the strategies and techniques and transmitted them to the consultee for his action.

Five phases were conducted in each consultative relationship: initiation, observation, assessment, conference, and follow-up. The two approaches were differentiated by consultant interaction behaviors during the initiation and conference phases.

I functioned as consultant for both approaches, implementing each in two different elementary schools. None of the principals or teachers in the four schools had any prior contact with me. The responses of seven teachers exposed to the collaborative consultant approach and those of five exposed to the authoritative were examined to assess the differential effects of the two approaches.

Teacher satisfaction with consultation was defined as the difference between ratings on pre-consultation and post-consultation attitude questionnaires. The data were statistically analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U Test and the Smirnov Test.

Results

Teachers who consulted with a collaborative consultant were significantly more satisfied with the consultation than were those who consulted with an authoritative consultant, $T = 29$, $p < .05$, Mann-Whitney, one-tailed test. The mean differences for the teachers' responses to the two questionnaires for the collaborative consultant (CC) and the authoritative consultant (AC) approaches are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Differences in Teacher Post-Consultation Attitudes Towards Two Consultant Approaches			
Mean Differences		Ranks	
CC	AC	CC	AC
-1.14	-2.86	2	1
.71	0	5	3
1.86	.57	8.5	4
1.86	1.00	8.5	6
2.29	1.14	10	7
2.86		11	
3.57		12	
Sum of Ranks		57	21
<u>T</u>		29*	6

* $p < .05$, Mann-Whitney U Test, one tailed.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the teacher attitudinal response to the two types of consultant interactional behaviors. Each entry in Table 2 corresponds to a question from the consultation evaluation forms. As can be seen, the teachers expressed significantly more favorable attitudes about the collaborative consultant's behaviors in four of the seven areas of consultant functioning.

Table 2

Difference in Teacher Post-Consultation Attitudes by Consultation Area		
Consultation Area	T_1^+	
	CC	AC
1. Consultant's attentiveness.	.71*	
2. Consultant's success in helping teacher achieve a better understanding of the student.	.46 ^a	
3. Consultant's success in helping teacher develop useful intervention strategies.	.71*	
4. Applicability of the developed intervention strategies.	.71*	
5. Consultant's success in making teacher feel comfortable in the consultation sessions.	.31	
6. Consultant's degree of competence.	.43	
7. Consultant's overall helpfulness.	.71*	

$$a_{T_1^+} < .05 = .66.$$

* $p < .05$, Smirnov Test, one tailed.

Discussion

The patterning of this data suggests that the difference in teacher attitudes was the result of a difference in consultant interactional behaviors rather than one in quality or quantity of consultant services. Three of the four areas in which the collaborative approach received significantly

higher ratings were those one would predict to be higher on the basis of the aforementioned speculation about the values of collaboration. These areas were: 1) consultant attentiveness to the consultee, 2) consultant success in the development of useful intervention strategies, and 3) consultant success in the development of interventions which were applicable to the classroom situation. On the other hand, there was no significant difference in teacher satisfaction in those areas which would be most affected by consultant preparation and personality: 1) consultant's success in helping teacher achieve a better understanding of the student, 2) consultant's success in making teacher feel comfortable in the consultation sessions, and 3) consultant's degree of competence.

Because of the quasi-experimental nature of this study and the very small sample size used, these findings must be viewed as merely tentative. Furthermore, any interpretations made from these findings must be considered speculative. Nevertheless, speculation can be useful if it leads to further study. This field experiment suggests several possibilities of importance for school psychology consultation that need further exploration.

If teacher satisfaction with consultation were found, by future research, to be significantly greater when the consultant functioned in a collaborative fashion, would the teachers' satisfaction generalize to their overall perceptions of consultants using this approach? If so, would it eliminate, or at least blunt, the often-heard criticism that school

psychology consultants are usually of little help, merely recommending actions which have already been tried or which are impractical? It seems possible! For by fostering a collaborative relationship, consultants could greatly improve the chances that recommendations were built on what the teacher had already done and were implementable in his particular situation.

Second, would the collaborative approach also have a significant impact on teachers' post-consultation actions towards their clients? It seems entirely possible that the potentially greater usefulness and applicability of the jointly-developed recommendations, plus the commitment generated by the involvement, could lead to an increased and more thorough implementation of consultation recommendations.

These possibilities, plus others, must await further research for confirmation. Hopefully, this research will not be long in coming. For it could provide not only a clearer picture of the consultant component but also facilitate the next step: The empirical investigation of the interaction of the consultant component with the other three components. Once we have launched into the study of this interaction, we will be well on our way to understanding the process of consultation.

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